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How can early French immersion teachers prevent struggling readers from experiencing persistent reading problems?

Early Identification and Intervention for At-Risk Readers in French Immersion

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Children who experience difficulty in learning to read often remain poor readers in later years.[1,2] An unfortunate cycle ensues, in that the more frustration these children experience, the more disinterested they become in reading. Abundant evidence links early identification of reading problems to constructive interventions and improved student achievement.[3] Despite the importance of early identification, French immersion students in Senior Kindergarten or Grade 1 in Ontario are generally not assessed for potential reading problems until Grade 2 or 3,[4] once they have acquired listening and speaking skills in French.[5] As a result of this delay, many young readers typically do not receive timely instructional interventions.[6]

Research Tells Us

- Identifying children who may be struggling as readers in their earliest years of schooling sets them up to experience success.
- English tests of phonological awareness can be effectively used to identify struggling readers in SK or Grade 1 French immersion programs.
- Once identified, instructional interventions in English and in French can be initiated while the gap between strong and weak readers is still relatively small.
- Low achieving readers benefit from systematic and explicit instruction in phonological awareness.

The Importance of Early Identification and Early Intervention

Recent studies have shown that tests of phonological awareness can be used effectively with young children to predict later reading ability.[7,8] MacGoubrey et al.[5] found that English phonological awareness tests, administered at the beginning of Grade 1 French immersion, predicted future reading achievement of native-English speakers in both French and English. This study shows that English phonological awareness tests can be used to identify weak readers in French immersion at the beginning of the school year, rather than waiting until French oral proficiency is acquired. Following early identification, instructional interventions can be initiated to narrow the gap between the lowest-achieving children and their peers.

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Phonological and Phonemic Awareness Defined

- Phonological awareness refers to the insight that spoken words consist of smaller units of sound.
- A child who has phonological awareness skills would be alert to the fact that "table" is made up of two different syllables, (/ta/, /ble/).
- Phonemic awareness is a sub-category of phonological awareness, referring specifically to the ability to identify and manipulate phonemes.
- A child who has phonemic awareness skills would be sensitive to the fact that "table" contains four different phonemes, (/t/, /a/, /b/,/l/).
- Any student who lacks phonemic awareness is likely to struggle with acquisition of reading skills, so the ultimate goal of phonological awareness instruction is increasing phonemic awareness.[9]

In another study in the French immersion context, MacCoubrey[10] examined both early identification of and early intervention for low-achieving readers. This study focused on SK French immersion students from English-speaking families. For 12 weeks, one group was provided with phonemic awareness training in French, while a control group was engaged in French vocabulary-building activities. Results indicated that students in the first group made significant improvements in phonological awareness in both French and English, as compared with those in the second group who served as a control for the study who received French vocabulary instruction only.

MacCoubrey et al.[5] argue that identifying children as struggling readers on the basis of risk, rather than deficit, early in their educational careers and providing timely instruction in phonological awareness, has several benefits. Rather than waiting for children to fail, it sets them up to succeed. If educators intervene while the achievement gap between strong and weak readers is still relatively small, fewer students enrolled in early immersion programs are likely to experience reading problems. As a result, the number of children with persistent reading difficulties referred for Special Education services in later years can be dramatically reduced.[12]

Early identification and prompt intervention also promises to reduce the rate of attrition from French immersion programs. Due to Special Education restrictions and funding constraints, low-achieving readers in early immersion are faced with limited options. Reading difficulties are one of the most important factors influencing parents to transfer their children from French immersion to the regular English program.[13] This decision to withdraw children from the program is typically made prior to the end of Grade 3.[14] If resources in French immersion programs are directed toward systematic and explicit reading instruction early on, young readers have the potential to become proficient in both French and English.

Although MacCoubrey's[5,10] studies shed light on children's literacy development in the early French immersion context, they have several limitations. First, the participants were predominantly native-English speakers. This does not reflect the changing demographics in French immersion schools in large urban centres, where students come increasingly from varied language backgrounds.[11] Second, it is unclear whether similar interventions would be effective with an older population. Finally, French was the sole language of instruction. Based upon our experience, it is not always feasible to provide reading interventions in French when children are just beginning to acquire the language. Our investigation, summarized below, attempts to address these challenges.

An Empirical Study Involving Early French Immersion Children

We recently conducted a research project in a public, single-track French immersion elementary school in Ontario to examine the impact of early identification of and early intervention for students in Grade 1. Participants were students who were identified as being at risk for reading difficulties because they failed to meet the school board's end-of-SK reading expectations and scored at or below the 40th percentile on The Phonological Awareness Test 2.[9] These students came from diverse linguistic backgrounds. In small groups, during designated language periods every other day, the children received 10 weeks of English phonological awareness instruction, followed immediately by 10 weeks of French phonological awareness instruction.

Instruction was linked to popular children's literature so that learning would take place in a meaningful and authentic manner. Activities at the word, syllable and phoneme level were based upon vocabulary taken directly from stories.

which were read aloud. For example, vocabulary from *The Gingerbread Man*[15] was used to increase awareness of the number of syllables in words read aloud (e.g., "bread" has 1 syllable, but "gingerbread" has 3 syllables). Students were asked to clap once for each syllable or word part they heard, and cubes were used as visual representations (a different colour for each syllable). These "contextualized literacy experiences"[16] (p. 212) provided a context for direct instruction. The Phonological Awareness Test 2 was readministered following the 20-week intervention. Results indicated that the participants made considerable improvements in phonological awareness skills.

The investigation also sought to determine the impact of phonological awareness instruction on the development of reading skills. At the end of the year, classroom teachers administered a reading assessment, *Alpha-jeunes*,[17] to all of their students. The assessment results of the target group, as well as their third term report card marks, were compared with the results of the previous year's low-achieving readers, who had not received the phonological awareness intervention. The reading achievement levels of the target group were significantly higher that those of the comparison group.

The Challenges Ahead

Supplemental instruction for young readers, provided early in their educational careers in small group settings, is the key to breaking the cycle of frustration and low achievement. As Stanovich so eloquently stated, "Identify early, remedy early, and focus on phonological awareness"[1] (p. 394). At-risk students in early French immersion programs benefit from early intervention that focuses on strengthening their sensitivity to the different sound components within spoken language. An effective intervention can be initiated in English when children's French oral proficiency is low. With appropriate support, these students can become proficient readers in French and English.

Recommendations for Classroom Practice

First, as early as possible in the school year, identify children who are low-achieving readers:

- Consult with board leaders about resources and select a phonological awareness measure that is sensitive to individual differences among your students.
- Check your test manual carefully to ensure that the test is predictive of reading growth and has good reliability (e.g., above 0.85).
- Many tests are standardized, which will allow you to compare your students' performance against that of a normative sample. This will help you determine which children will benefit most from phonological awareness instruction.

Second, develop explicit sequenced activities in both English and French to reinforce phonological awareness:

- Begin instruction with tasks at the word level and progress gradually to more difficult tasks at the syllable and phoneme levels.
- Based upon the following sequence, increase awareness that:
  - Sentences can be broken down into words.
  - Words can be further broken down into syllables.
  - Syllables can be even further broken down into phonemes.
- Keep in mind that instruction that focuses on segmenting and blending has the greatest impact on the development of early reading skills.[3]

"Our young readers in French immersion programs need early reading instruction as much as our young readers in English-language programs."

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In Sum

To make a difference, early immersion educators should consider identifying at-risk students and intervening as early as possible. Once the cycle of frustration sets in and children begin to struggle, remediation efforts may be inadequate.[1,2] Our young readers in French immersion programs need early reading instruction as much as our young readers in English-language programs. Efforts to identify these children at an earlier stage in their literacy development and to implement interventions would reduce the number of children referred for Special Education support, as well as the number who ultimately transfer to the regular English program. This may lead to an increase in the proportion of bilingual secondary school graduates in Canada, one of the goals of the federal government's Action Plan for Official Languages.

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